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ABSTRACT

As a continuation of a study of the effects of mandatory student placement in communications courses at Oakton College, a follow-up study was conducted of students enrolled in Communications 051, a developmental course. The study sought to assess the patterns of behavior of students enrolling in developmental communications courses, completion rates, and the correlation of course performance with standardized placement test scores. An analysis of the records of a random sample of 136 of the 410 students enrolled in Communications 051 in fall 1981 revealed that: (1) 92% of the sample were under 25 years of age and two-thirds were enrolled in four or more courses; (2) the majority of students enrolled in the course had below college-level scores on the Nelson-Denny and Educational Testing Service (ETS) tests; (3) half of the students enrolled in the course received a passing grade; (4) a substantially higher proportion of the Communications 051 students received non-passing grades in fall 1981 than of the student body in general; (5) 74% of the students in the sample continued at Oakton in spring 1981, as compared with 61% of the entire student body; (6) while Communications 051 students tended to have higher than average completion rates in Communications 101 (84% compared to the overall course completion rate of 76%), they tended to earn fewer high grades in the course; and (7) neither the Nelson-Denny nor ETS tests predicted academic performance as measured by grade point average. (HB)

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Follow-up Study of Students Enrolled in Developmental Communications, Fall 1981

Oakton Community College

Office of Institutional Research
Trudy Bers
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VC 820 528

Executive Summary
Follow-up Study of Students Enrolled in
Developmental Communications, Fall 1981

Introduction

As a continuation of the study of the effects of mandatory placement in communications a follow-up study of students enrolled in communications 051 in the fall of 1981 was conducted.

Methodology and Sample

A random sample of 136 of the 410 students enrolled in communications 051 in the fall of 1981 was selected for follow-up. All data were drawn from student records.

Results

Students enrolled in communcations 051 were primarily young, full-time students. Placement test scores were available for 76% of the students; mean scores on Nelson-Denny tests ranged from 9.7 on the Reading Rate to 11.1 on Vocabulary. The Mean ETS score was 29.7.

Fifty-five percent of students enrolled in communications 051 received a T in course. During the fall term 22% of the student body received at least one R in a course, while 49% of communications 051 students received at least one R. Nearly twice the number of developmental students received Ws than the number of W recipients in the student body. These data suggest developmental students are high risk students academically.

Seventy-four percent of fall communications 051 students enrolled in Oakton in the spring 1982 term. Seventy-four percent of them enrolled in communication 101. Earning credit in communications 101 was not associated with performance in 051; 89% of students enrolled in 101 who received a T passed 101, and 74% who did not successfully complete 051 received credit in 101. Students who had enrolled in communications 051 in the fall and communications 101 in the spring received fewer high grades and more low grades in 101 than students who enrolled directly in communications 101, but a higher percentage of them actually received credit in the course.

Data do not indicate that either the Nelson-Denny or the ETS tests predict academic performance at Oakton as measured by grade point average.

Discussion

Because a T grade in communications 051 does not enter into a student's grade point average, nor is credit in the course transferable or applicable to an associate degree, students have little incentive to remain in the course or to formally drop the course. Thus it is inappropriate to assume that students who failed to obtain a T in the course received no benefit from it; they may have achieved their goals and then simply stopped attending.

Although it is tempting to generalize about the "success" or "failure" of communications 051, this study does not lend itself to such discussions. Students who go on to take communications 101 have not necessarily passed 051, and passing 051 is not associated with successful performance in 101. The extent to which Oakton's nonpunitive grading system and registration requirements (students need not have passed 051 to enroll in 101) contribute to these findings cannot be assessed here.

In the fall of 1982 a study of the effects of a newly instituted mandatory placement policy in communications 101 was conducted. As a continuation of that study, a sample of students who enrolled in developmental communications, communications 051, in the fall of 1981 has been selected for follow-up. This report presents the results of the follow-up.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

All data presented here were derived from student records. Reasons as to why students failed to complete communications 051, enroll at Oakton in the spring, enroll in communications 101 in the spring, or to complete communications 101 in the spring, are not available. However, as a first attempt to assess the pattern of behavior of students enrolling in developmental communications courses, data presented here shed light on the completion ratios and correlation of performance with standardized Nelson-Denny and Educational Testing Service placement examinations

A sample of 136 students was randomly selected from the 410 students enrolled in sections of communications 051 in the fall of 1981. The drawing was based on tenth day class lists; therefore, students who dropped the course after the second week of the semester were included in the population.

Because of the fact that the sample was drawn randomly, generalizations to the population of students enrolled in communications 051 in the fall term can be made.

RESULTS

Characteristics of Sample: Students enrolled in communications 051 in fall 1981 were primarily young, full-time students. The mean age was 20, with 84% of those who gave their ages being 20 years old or younger, and fully 92% being under the age of 25. In the fall of 1981 two-thirds of these student enrolled in four or more courses. Of the 100 students who enrolled at Oakton in the spring term (74% of those enrolled in the fall), two-thirds took four or more courses. The group was evenly divided among the sexes, with 51% being male and 49% female.

Performance on Placement Tests: Table 1 presents data regarding student performances on placement tests. Clearly few students were performing at college level on the Nelson-Denny tests. Mean scores on the Educational Testing Service test were well below the placement cut-off of 36. Caution should be used in evaluating the ETS scores, however, since locally-developed items were added to the test, and it is not possible to determine whether students' low scores were attributable to these items, the standardized ETS items, or a combination of these. No scores were available for 24% of students drawn into the sample. These individuals may have elected to enroll in communications 051 because they realized, without testing, that they were in need of developmental communications, or they may have been tested during an earlier semester and simply delayed enrollment into communications 051 until the fall term. Since the sample was drawn using tenth day enrollment rosters, students who were recommended for transfer into communications 101 based on the first week writing sample would not have been included in the population used. Students, whether in communications 051 because of self-placement or placement by test scores, were appropriately placed in developmental communications.

Performance in Fall 1981: Of the 410 students enrolled in communications 051 in the fall of 1981, 226, or 55%, received grades of T at the end of the term. Among sampled students, 52% received the T grade; essentially, there is no difference, then, in the proportion of students in the entire population and in the sample who received grades of T in communications 051. Twenty-one percent of sampled students received no grade in communication 051, indicating they withdrew from the class prior to the awarding of final grades. An additional 16% received Rs, an indeterminant number of which may have been awarded to students who simply stopped attending class. These data indicate that approximately half of students enrolled in communications 051 remain in the course and receive the "passing" grade of T.

Of the sampled students, 84 (62%) received credit in at least one course in the fall term. A T grade in communications 051 is not considered a course here, since the grade does not enter into grade point average calculations. The 84 students had a mean GPA of 2.4, with a standard deviation of .7. Students received a fairly substantial number of R, X, and W grades, as Table 2 indicates. Nearly half of students in communications 051 received at least one R. Excluding the students who received an R in communications 051, data indicate that 32% of the students received at least one R in a course other than communcations 051. Comparable calculations for the X and W grade; that is, excluding the X or W in communications 051, indicate that 5% received an X in a course other than communications 051 and 16% received one or more Ws in courses other than communications 051. These data suggest that students enrolled in communications 051 are high risk students academically.

The high risk attribute of developmental students is further confirmed by comparing the rate of Rs, Xs, and Ws awarded to them with those of the student body at large. Table 2 presents proportions of students in the entire student body who received at least one R, X, or W in the fall of 1981. Though the percentage of students receiving at least one X is approximately the same in each group, it is clear that a substantially higher percentage of students enrolled in communications 051 recieved one or more Rs or Ws than did the entire student body.

Enrollment in Spring, 1982: Of the 136 sampled students enrolled in communications 051 in fall, 1981, 100 (74%) continued at Oakton in the spring term, 1982. This is a significantly higher percentage of continuing students than occurred among the student body in general; 61% of the spring 1982 student body was composed of continuing students.

Of the communications 051 students who continued into the spring term, 74% enrolled in communications 101. Sixty-eight percent of the students who passed Communications 051 took Communications 101, but of the fall developmental students who took communications 101 in the spring, only 64% had received a T in 051. Earning credit in communcations 101 was not associated with performance in 051; of those who received a T in 051 and took 101, 89% passed 101. Of those who did not successfully complete 051 and who took 101, 74% passed 101.

Performance in Spring 1982 Of all students enrolled in communications 101 in the spring of 1982, 76% who remained in the course through the end of the term received a grade of D or better. Of the students sampled in this study who enrolled in communications 101, 84% received a passing grade. Table 3 presents data comparing the distribution of grades for all communications 101 students in the spring with the grade distribution for students who had taken communications 051 in the fall. Developmental students were less likely to receive As and Bs and more likely to receive Cs and Ds than all students, and fewer of them failed to complete the course requirements. Put another way, although students who had been in communications 051 receive fewer high grades in communications 101 than all students, a higher percentage of them receive credit in the course.

The mean spring grade point average of students who had enrolled in communications 051 in the fall was 2.3, with a standard deviation of .7. This is essentially the same GPA as was earned by the sample in the fall of 1981.

Table 4 presents percentages of students earning one or more R, X, or W grades in the fall and spring terms. The percentage earning Rs dropped from fall to spring, while the percentage of those earning X doubled.

Association between Placement Tests and Performance The association between placement tests (Nelson-Denny Total, Nelson-Denny Reading Rate, Nelson-Denny Comprehension and the Educational Testing Service test) and academic performance in communications 051 and 101 and all courses were assessed in several ways. First, the correlation between the placement tests

and fall and spring grade point averages were calculated. Table 5 presents these calculations. For the fall all correlation coefficients are statistically significant; however, scores on the placement tests account for only 5-9% of the variance in grade point averages (R^2), and for the spring term placement test scores are not associated with grade point averages. Table 6 indicates the percentage of those in each third (lowest, middle, and top) of the placement tests who successfully completed communications 051 and communications 101. Since not all students had taken placement tests, only those for whom test scores were available are included. No distinct pattern of association between test scores--divided in to thirds--and successful completion of either communications course is evident. Even thought this study does not indicate a significant "predictive relationship", national samples for both the Nelson-Denny and the ETS test of written expression indicate a significant correlation between the test scores and college GPA's.

DISCUSSION

Data presented here indicate that students enrolled in developmental communications are academic high-risk students in the sense that a higher proportion of them fail to receive credit in one or more courses than is the case of the student body. These students do have a higher rate of return to the college in the subsequent semester than all students, and once enrolled in communications 101, are as likely to pass the course as nondevelopmental students. However, the grades they earn in communications 101 are not as high.

Although it is tempting to generalize about the "success" or "failure" of communications 051 in a study such as this, it would be inappropriate to do so. The fact is that students who go on to take communications 101 have not necessarily passed 051, and passing 051 is not associated with successful performance in 101.

Communications 051 does not provide students with transfer credits, and the T grade does not enter into grade point calculations. Therefore, a student has little incentive to remain in 051 if s/he believes completing the course will not materially improve writing ability. Some students may achieve what they perceive to be necessary competence during the first several weeks or months of 051 and simply refuse to complete the course. Without sanctions attached to such behavior, they simply stop attending class and receive an R or N. Thus we cannot assume that students not receiving a T did not benefit from communications 051.

Table 1

Performance on Placement Tests

Test	Mean	S. D.	Percent above Twelfth Grade	N
Nelson-Denny Vocabulary	11.1	2.3	.22	103
Nelson-Denny Comprehension	9.8	2.2	.08	103
Nelson-Denny Total	10.4	2.2	.15	103
Nelson-Denny Reading Rate	9.1	3.1	.15	101
ETS	29.7	5.2	NA	101

Table 2

RXW Grades - Fall 1981
Communication 051 Sample & Student Body

	Percent Receiving One or More		
Grade	R	X	W
Communications Sample (N=136)	.49	.07	.18
Student Body (N=8639)	.22	.09	.10

Table 3

Spring 1982 - Communications 101 Grade Distribution*

	A	B	C	D	R	W	X
Students enrolled in Communications 051 Fall 1981	.07	.26	.47	.09	.09	.03	--
All Communications 101 Students	.15	.30	.27	.04	.14	.05	.05

* Based on students at end of term; N grades at mid-term are excluded from calculation

Table 4

RXW Grades - Fall 1981 and Spring 1982
Communications 051 Students

Grade	Percent Receiving One or More		
	R	X	W
Fall 1981 (N=136)	.49	.07	.18
Spring 1982 (N=100)	.40	.14	.19

Table 5

Correlations--Placement Tests and Grade Point Averages

	Fall GPA	Spring GPA
Nelson-Denny Total	.27*	.05
Nelson-Denny Reading Rate	.25*	.09
Nelson-Denny Comprehension	.32*	.05
ETS	.24*	.04

* $p < .05$

Table 6

Placement Test Scores and
Successful Course Completion

	Percent Passing Course	
	Communications 051	Communications 101
ETS		
Lowest third	.49	.83
Middle third	.49	.86
Top third	.73	.100
Nelson-Denny Total		
Lowest third	.56	.81
Middle third	.41	.91
Top third	.68	.91
Nelson-Denny Reading Rate		
Lowest third	.62	.88
Middle third	.58	.86
Top third	.47	.91
Nelson-Denny Comprehension		
Lowest third	.56	.47
Middle third	.46	.54
Top third	.66	.53

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